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Pathology and Pregnancy: Constructions of Female Difference in Plautus' *Amphitruo*

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Pathology and Pregnancy: Constructions of Female Difference in Plautus' *Amphitruo*

by

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Dedication

To my mother, Lida Grace Burris. *Sicut mater, ita et filia eius.*

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Abstract

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Plautus' *Amphitruo* departs from Roman theatrical precedent by combining tragic convention with comic elements, creating the new genre of "tragicomedy." Also unprecedented is the play's presentation of a pregnant character on stage: as Amphitruo, Alcumena, and the enslaved Sosia struggle to orient themselves amidst the confusion caused by Jupiter and Mercury, Alcumena also prepares for the birth of a child by her husband and, unbeknownst to her, the birth of Hercules by Jupiter. I examine the way that her visible and oft-referenced pregnancy heightens the dramatic thrust of the tragicomedy, arguing that Alcumena's otherness, emphasized visually and thematically by her pregnancy, serves as a destabilizing force which contributes both to the sense of comedic befuddlement and to the narrative's potentially tragic stakes. By taking into account ancient attitudes towards women's reproductive capacities and responsibilities, we enhance our understanding of the dynamics in the play and the ways that Roman audiences might have interpreted the performance. Additionally, we can recognize

similar strategies in contemporary representations of pregnant women and use modern medical science to interrogate persistent misogynistic stereotypes.

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INTRODUCTION

In the prologue of Plautus' *Amphitruo,* Mercury announces to the audience that the play will not be bound by convention, but will instead combine tragic and comedic elements to form a "tragicomoedia," a new genre unseen elsewhere in the Plautine *corpus.* (50-61) Like other works of Plautus, *Amphitruo* employs the common comedic strategies of mistaken identity, strained family relations, deception, and bombastic violence. It simultaneously takes on tragic characteristics, depicting a household thrown into chaos. It also departs from Roman theatrical precedent in its presentation of a pregnant woman on stage. As Amphitruo, Alcumena, and the enslaved Sosia struggle to orient themselves amidst the confusion caused by Jupiter and Mercury, Alcumena also prepares for the birth of a child by her husband and, unbeknownst to her, the birth of Hercules by Jupiter.

Although Alcumena has been heralded by classicists as a standard against whom all Roman wives and mothers can be judged, a character whose dignity Plautus leaves intact, recent scholarship has interrogated the way that Alcumena is manipulated and mocked throughout the play. Following this approach, I examine the way that her visible and oft-referenced pregnancy heightens the dramatic thrust of the tragicomedy. I argue that Alcumena's otherness, emphasized visually and thematically by her pregnancy, serves as a destabilizing force which contributes both to the sense of comedic befuddlement and to the narrative's potentially tragic stakes. Her alterity, emphasized by pregnancy, provides fodder for misogynistic punchlines while also underscoring the grave repercussions of potentially dangerous and illegitimate procreation.

The medical language employed by Amphitruo and Sosia in their exchanges about Alcumena, as well as their reliance on misogynistic tropes to enhance both the humor and the tension of the play, point to ancient conventions that deemed women deficient, vulnerable, and

unstable by virtue of their reproductive capacities. By taking into account androcentric constructs of female nature, particularly the framing of women's reproductive capacities and responsibilities, we enhance our understanding of the dynamics in the play and the ways that Roman audiences might have interpreted the performance. Additionally, we can recognize similar strategies in contemporary representations of pregnant women and use modern medical science to interrogate modern misogynistic stereotypes.

I. PERFORMING PREGNANCY: ALCUMENA ON STAGE

Very few *matronae* appear in Plautus' dramas, and where they do, they are usually trying to corral their philandering husbands.[1] Alcumena's presence on stage would have been unusual, and her costumed pregnancy even moreso. In keeping with the play's nature as a tragicomedy, the pregnancy serves as an embodiment of tragic potential at the same time that it provides comedic fodder. Alcumena's staging and treatment by Sosia, Amphitruo, and Jupiter draw attention to her female difference, which serves as a destabilizing force throughout the play.

Scholarship on *Amphitruo* has traditionally emphasized Alcumena's exceptional dignity and matronly virtue.[2] While most of Plautus' comic characters—particularly his female characters—are unsympathetic, Alcumena is said to stand out as "the noblest woman character in Plautine comedy."[3] Although Alcumena may be technically guilty of adultery through her tryst with Jupiter, her earnestness and sincerity grant her credibility in the eyes of modern scholars. Duckworth even goes so far as to suggest that Alcumena's proclamation of fidelity reflects a Roman fantasy of ideal womanhood, arguing that the "chaste, noble, patriotic sentiments of Alcumena sound thoroughly Roman, and as a character she is perhaps closer to real life than are most of the wives in Plautus."[4] In her own proclamations of innocence, Alcumena signals not only the virtues of modesty and marital devotion, but also more general Roman values,

[1] Christenson (2001) 245

[2] A more thorough literary review of Alcumena's treatment in secondary scholarship can be found in Phillips (1984) 121.

[3] Duckworth (1994) 150

[4] Duckworth (1994) 257

defending herself on the grounds of religious piety and familial honor.[5] Nyenhuis similarly endows Alcumena with "composure" and "strength of character," describing even her threat of divorce as "consistent with her sense of dignity and integrity."[6] Like Penelope, he continues, Alcumena resists the chaos of the plot around her by invoking the virtues Roman audiences would have taken most seriously. Although Nyenhuis describes Alcumena as a well-developed character, he also reduces her to her "womanly affection," giving Plautus credit for his supposedly "keen insight...into the psychology of an upright woman."[7] Thus, by placing Alcumena on a pedestal, scholars reduce her to a one-dimensional character, valuable only as an antidote to chaos and as a reflection of what male audiences want to see—"everything the Romans admired in a wife."[8] Her exceptionalism prevents her from engaging in the world of her own comedy and instead imbues her with the seriousness of a tragic heroine.

Phillips and Christenson challenge this reading of Alcumena's character, arguing that while she may not be a jokester, her staging and situation are set up as jokes. The otherwise dignified Alcumena "is treated in a comic, even cruelly comic fashion by other characters, with repeated imputations about both her sanity and chastity."[9] According to Phillips, Alcumena's humor derives from her pregnancy; many of Mercury and Sosia's jokes draw attention to the pregnancy, suggesting that the actor who played Alcumena would have been padded to look visibly and exaggeratedly pregnant. Padded costumes of Old Comedy had mostly fallen out of

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[5] "Istuc facinus, quod tu insimulas, nostro generi non decet. / tu si me inpudicitiae captas, capere non potes." (That crime, [i.e. being seduced by another man] which you allege, does not befit my family line. If you try to catch me on adultery, you cannot take me.) Plaut. *Amph.* 820-21. All translations my own.

[6] Nyenhuis (1970) 50

[7] Nyenhuis (1970) 50

[8] Segal (1987) 22

[9] Phillips (1985) 122

fashion by *Amphitruo's* time, but Plautus "may have adapted this otherwise discarded convention for the particular needs of a play that had a pregnant woman in a chief role."[10] Reading the play with a Bakhtinian eye, Christenson argues that Alcumena's costume might have been "grotesquely padded," transforming the proper matron into a "bloated and caricatured form."[11] The text suggests this visual component: Mercury announces in the prologue, **"**nunc de Alcumena ut rem teneatis rectius, / utrimque est gravida, et ex viro et ex summo Iove." (Now that you can comprehend the thing about Alcumena properly, she is pregnant by each, both from her husband and from lofty Jove) (110-11) Disguised as Amphitruo, Jupiter also references Alcumena's visually apparent pregnancy: "menses iam tibi esse actos **vides**." (You **see** that your months are now completed) (500)

The appearance of "caricatured" padding on a male actor playing a female noble woman may have in itself been funny to a Roman audience who might have never seen pregnancy acted out on stage.[12] While pregnant women do not appear on stage in any other case, the motif of pregnancy as a vehicle for body humor appears elsewhere, suggesting its comedic potency: in Plautus' *Curculio,* Cappadox compares his gastrointestinal bloating to being pregnant with twins, saying, "nam iam quasi zona liene cinctus ambulo / geminos in ventre habere videor filios." (For now I walk cinched by my spleen like a girdle; I seem to have twin sons in my belly) (220-221) Marshall suggests that this description, which Christenson calls "absurd and no doubt highly visual humor," refers intertextually to Alcumena.[13] Thus, Alcumena's superficial dignity is

[10] Phillips (1985) 123

[11] Christenson (2001) 244-5

[12] Christenson (2000) 38.

[13] Christenson (2000) 39, n. 118; Marshall (2006) 142

undercut by her distended belly. The body humor is made all the funnier because Alcumena, with all her tragic rhetoric, does not seem to know that her own body is comical.[14]

Phillips reads Alcumena's soliloquy, considered by others to be evidence of her blameless devotion to her husband, as sexual innuendo, which is "twice as funny when it comes from an unexpected source or in an unexpected context."[15] This speech mirrors tragic rhetorical form, but its many euphemisms betray sexual overtones, which could have been emphasized further by the way the actor performed the lines.[16]

> **Satin** parva res est **voluptatum** in vita atque in aetate agunda
> praequam quod molestum est? ita quoiq' comparatum est in aetate hominum;
> ita dis est placitum, **voluptatem** ut maeror comes consequatur:
> quin incommodi plus malique ilico adsit, boni si optigit quid.
> nam ego id nunc experior domo atque ipsa de me scio, quoi **voluptas**
> parumper datast, dum viri [mei] mi potestas videndi fuit
> **noctem unam** modo; atque is repente abiit a me hinc ante lucem.
> sola hic mi nunc videor, quia ille hinc abest quem ego amo praeter omnis.
> plus aegri ex abitu viri, quam ex adventu **voluptati'** cepi.
> Sed hoc me beat
> saltem, quom perduellis vicit et domum laudis compos revenit:
> id solacio est.
> apsit, dum modo laude parta
> domum recipiat se; feram et perferam usque
> abitum eiius animo forti atque offirmato, id modo si mercedis
> datur mi, ut meus victor vir belli clueat.
> **satis** mi esse ducam.
> **virtus** praemium est optumum;
> **virtus** omnibus rebus anteit profecto:
> libertas, salus, vita, res et parentes, patria et prognati
> tutantur, seruantur:
> **virtus** omnia in sese habet, omnia adsunt
> bona quem **penest virtus.**

[14] Christenson (2000) 45

[15] Phillips (1985) 126

[16] Christenson (2000) 41

> So really the matter of **pleasures** in our life and doings is small in comparison with that of the troublesome. Thusly it is the same for each in the life of men; thusly it is **pleasing** to the gods, that sadness follows **enjoymen**t as a companion: in fact that there be more distress and more misfortune immediately if something good happens. For now I experience it at home, and I know it concerning myself, to whom **pleasure** was given for a short while, there was a chance for me to see my husband for only one night; and then suddenly he is gone from me before daylight. I seem to myself deserted here now, since he, whom I love more than everyone, is gone from here. I took more pain from his departure than **pleasure** from his arrival. But this at least gladdens me, that he conquered the enemies and returned home granted honors: this is a comfort to me. He may be away, so long as brings himself home with merited glory; I will bear and endure his absence with a strong and determined spirit always, if only a reward is given to me, that my husband be said to be a conqueror in war. I will consider this **enough** for me. His **manliness** is the best prize. **Manliness** surely stands before all things: freedom, safety, life, property and parents, fatherland and descendents are guarded, are preserved: **manliness** holds everything in itself: All good things are present for him who is in possession of **manliness**. (633-53)

In "Obscenity and Performance on the Plautine Stage," Jeppesen combats the traditional scholarly view that "there is no obscenity in Plautus, because there is a lack of primary verbal obscenities in the text." This approach, he argues, ignores visual possibilities afforded by performance but not conveyed through text, such as "allusion to imitation of obscene action."[17] Additionally, several words repeated throughout this passage connote sexual pleasure and satisfaction. Alcumena's emphasis on *voluptas* and *virtus* illustrates her dutiful affection and devotion to her courageous husband on the one hand, but on the other hand, references a sexual desire actually stoked by Jupiter.[18] *Voluptas,* used four times in the span of nine lines, commonly refers to sexual enjoyment.[19] *Virtus,* literally manly virtue, applies not only to masculine military

[17] Jeppesen (2015) 176

[18] Phillips (1985) 125-6

[19] Adams (1982) 197

success but also to "progenerative manliness," both of which constitute Amphitruo's appeal.[20] It shares a root with *virilitas* and *virilia,* even more explicit in their connotation of male genitalia.[21] It is her husband's *virtus,* Alcumena explains, that leaves her *satis,* which can indicate satisfaction in a general, but also in a distinctly sexual, sense.[22] The theme of satiety develops throughout the play, underscoring the connection between sexual satisfaction and pregnant fullness.[23] Additionally, *penest*—a crasis formed from *penes* and *est*—may be a pun on *penis,* which literally means *tail,* but by the classical period had become a common slang term for the penis, and by the end of the Republic evolved into commonly accepted colloquialism.[24] Alcumena alludes to her own encounter with Jupiter when she interrogates what is pleasing to the gods right before referring to the previous night's activities.[25] Phillips reads this series of double entendres as funny not only because Alcumena's own pregnancy provides visual evidence of her sexual history, but also because Alcumena is ignorant of the true source of her sexual satisfaction and the nature of the pregnancy inside her.[26] Christenson argues that this "interest in sexuality… directly conflicts with the public persona of a *matrona."*[27] I counter that Alcumena is not so much conflicted as she is undermined; she may be sexual, but she is also sexualized, even in her most serious moments.[28] She earnestly invokes Jupiter while carrying evidence of his immorality. In what Christenson dubs the most serious part of the play,

[20] Phillips (1985) 126

[21] Adams (1982) 69

[22] Adams (1982) 197, 215

[23] Christenson (2000) 40-1

[24] Christenson (2000) *ad loc.* For the diachronic development of *penis*, cf. Adams (1982) 35-6.

[25] Phillips (1985) 125

[26] Phillips (1985) 125

[27] Christenson (2000) 40

[28] Christenson (2000) 40

Alcumena swears by Jupiter and Juno, the former having raped her by deception and the latter plotting to murder her children:[29]

> Per supremi regis regnum iuro et matrem familias
> Iunonem, quam me vereri et metuere est par maxume,
> ut mi extra unum te mortalis nemo corpus corpore
> contigit, quo me impudicam faceret.
>
> I swear by the kingdom of the highest king and by household matron Juno, whom it is especially suitable for me to revere and fear, that no mortal man has touched his body with mine, whereby he might render me unchaste, save for you alone. (831-34)

As Alcumena's body becomes fodder for ribald humor, she loses control over her own experience and narrative. Not only does her body grow in the uncontrollable progression of her caricatured pregnancy, but the circumstances of her pregnancy—her impregnation by a disguised Jupiter—are also out of her control and unbeknownst to her. Alcumena is ignorant of the workings inside her own body, which she cannot control any more than she could control her own sexual violation. More seriously, she is unaware of the consumption of her body by Jupiter and by giddy audiences. Even Segal, who upholds Alcumena as a dutiful wife and does not interpret her soliloquy as an expression of misplaced sexual passion, states that the comedy of *Amphitruo* is "nothing more elevated than adultery and the joys offered by the body of Alcumena."[30] He characterizes the dramatic irony of the play as "strange *Schadenfreude* for the fact that Alcumena thinks she is with her husband, but in reality *cum moecho est."* (135)[31]

Alcumena's lack of control and understanding comprise much of *Amphitruo*'s humor, and confusion over her sexual propriety drives both the comedy and the potentially tragic chaos

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[29] Christenson (2000) 31

[30] Segal (1975) 2491

[31] "E che strana *Schadenfreude* per il fatto che Alcmena pensa di essere con il marito, ma in realtà *cum moecho est."* Segal (1975) 251

of the play. The other mortal characters also endure deception and confusion, and accusations of insanity pervade.[32] Sosia and Amphitruo voice their confusion and question Alcumena's sanity with misogynistic tropes, linking Alcumena's body and gender to the chaos. When Alcumena and Amphitruo first argue about whether they met on the previous night, Sosia interjects, advising Amphitruo, "Non tu scis? Bacchae bacchanti si velis advorsaier, / ex insana insaniorem facies, feriet saepius; / si obsequare, una resolvas plaga." (You don't know? If you wish to cross a Bacchant while she is frenzying, you will make her madder from her madness, and she will strike you more often; if you yield, you will soften her with one blow) (703-5) This reference to the madness of maenads alludes to the cult of Bacchus, which, as Christenson notes, was a source of controversy during Plautus' lifetime.[33] It also implies a particularly female brand of insanity and orgiastic frenzy, an insult made all the more biting when directed at a woman desperate to prove her propriety. Sosia brazenly connects Alcumena's pregnancy to mental illness soon after.

> **Sos:** Amphitruo, speravi ego istam tibi parituram filium;
> verum non est puero gravida.
> **Amph:** Quid igitur?
> **Sos:** Insania.
> **Alc:** Equidem sana sum et deos quaeso, ut salva pariam filium.
> **Sos:** Amphitruo, I hoped that she would give birth to a son; but she is not pregnant with a son.
> **Amph:** What, then?
> **Sos:** Insanity.

[32] Christenson (2000) 31 cites 401, 448, 582, 585b, and 604—all Mercury or Amphitruo accosting Sosia— as examples of accusations of insanity. Cf. Duckworth (1994) 147, 151, 194: he divides these plays into those that center around "innocent mistakes" and *errores* and plays that center around intentional deception, particularly by human actors. He puts *Amphitruo* in the former group, but notes that the deception caused by the gods resembles the latter category. Duckworth also notes that long plot explanations by Mercury—often criticized—are meant to aid audience comprehension of a play that is confusing even to them.

[33] Christenson (2000) *ad loc*.

> **Alc:** For my part, I am sane and I beseech the gods that I will bear a son unharmed. (718-20)

When Alcumena upbraids Sosia for this comment, he responds, "Enim vero praegnati oportet et malum et malum dari, / ut quod obrodat sit, animo si male esse occeperit." (Really, it suits a pregnant lady to be given both pain and an apple tree, so that there is something for her to peck at if she takes ill) (723-4) This pun references pregnant women's vulnerability to pica while "combining the idea of physical sickness in pregnancy with that of Alcumena's ill-disposedness toward [Sosia]."[34] Soon after, Amphitruo joins Sosia to further pathologize Alcumena's confusion. Amphitruo complains, "delirat uxor" (my wife is crazy), and Sosia responds by blaming her madness on an imbalance of "atra bili" (black bile). (727) Appropriating the vocabulary of a doctor and no longer referring to Alcumena as "uxor," Amphitruo then asks her, "Ubi primum tibi sensisti, mulier, impliciscier?" (When did you first feel disordered, woman?) (729) By assuming the role of a physician, Amphitruo not only attacks his wife for being confused, but also weaponizes his authority and status over her. While neither maenads nor black bile are associated with pregnancy specifically, the mentions of female deviance and humoral imbalance refocus attention towards Alcumena's body. Her pregnancy heightens the stakes of the accusation, as Amphitruo must fear not only for his wife, but also for the health and safety of his heir, whose existence Sosia has just called into question. (719)

When Amphitruo fears for his own sanity, Alcumena is still to blame. Echoing his previous characterization of Alcumena as a bacchant, and even an enchantress, Amphitruo exclaims, "nam haec quidem nos delirantis facere dictis postulat," (for she certainly desires to

[34] Christenson (2000) *ad loc.*

make us crazy with her words) with "dictis" carrying the implication of magic spells.[35] (789) Similarly, when Amphitruo finally begins to doubt his own identity, it is not his own sanity he questions, but Alcumena's, which he again equates with witchcraft by describing himself as "delenitus" (bewitched). (844) In line 605, Amphitruo worries that Sosia too has been bewitched, casting him as a victim rather than a perpetrator of the dark magic that ensnares him.[36] The theme of magic is more than incidental, as Christenson states, serving to emphasize the play's supernatural blurring of appearance and reality. Plautus underscores this theme further by naming Alcumena's maid Thessala, a reference to the stereotypical home of witches.[37] (707) When in line 753 Sosia asks if Amphitruo—whose "resistance to the supernatural befits his role as the play's chief 'blocking character'" and assumed role as arbiter of logic—is "quoque etiam insanis" (also insane), he does not so much seriously accuse Amphitruo as tease him; the question calls on Amphitruo to distance himself from his wife, emphasizing the contrast between "tu" (Amphitruo) and Alcumena.[38]

Later, when Jupiter—in the guise of Amphitruo—tries to make right, Alcumena asks if he is "sanus," but her question characterizes him as "stultior stultissimo" (more foolish than the most foolish) rather than truly deranged. (904-7) Alcumena's challenge to Jupiter is couched within a scene where she remains the punchline even as the accuser. In response, Jupiter

[35] Christenson (2000) *ad loc.*

[36] "Huic homini nescioquid est mali mala obiectum manu." (Some evil has been thrown upon this man by an evil hand.) Sosia's genuine ignorance of the plot perpetrated by Mercury and Jupiter against indicates a metatheatrical inversion of the comedic expectation that he, as a deceitful slave, should be the story's trickster. Cf. Christenson (2000) 31 and Stewart (1958).

[37] Christenson (2000) *ad loc.*

[38] Christenson (2000) 30

gaslights her, trying to convince her that she never should have taken allegations of infidelity seriously:[39]

> non edepol quo te esse impudicam crederem;
> verum periclitatus sum animum tuom,
> quid faceres et quo pacto id ferre induceres.
> equidem ioco illa dixeram dudum tibi,
> ridiculi causa.
>
> Good lord, I [did not say it] because I thought you were unfaithful; truly I was testing your spirit, testing what you would do and in what manner you would handle enduring it. Really, I said those things to you earlier as a joke, as a source of fun. (913-17)

He then blames her for reacting emotionally to the joke, as if she has behaved irrationally. When she stands her ground, he reverts to questioning whether she is "sana." (sane) (929)

The mortals' puzzlement is resolved at the same that Alcumena gives birth, suggesting a parallel between the characters' general sense of confusion and the uncertainty of imminent childbirth. Amphitruo discovers the truth from Bromia, and Jupiter's explanations immediately follow the miraculous offstage birth. Audiences must presume that Alcumena learns the truth offstage as well; she might perceive the truth while delivering her twins and watching the young Hercules fend off the serpent attack, or she might remain in the dark even after the conclusion of the play, when we could assume Amphitruo tells her. In either case, there is no plot- or staging-based reason why Alcumena cannot be present at the moment of epiphany, especially after her conspicuous presence in prior scenes. Phillips suggests that by not "show[ing] his audience Alcumena's psychological release from the confusion he made her play out," he perhaps "shares

[39] Larner (2016) 139. *Gaslighting*, a psychological term inspired by Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play *Gas Light,* refers to a form of psychological manipulation in which abusers compel victims to question their own sanity. Cf. Moreno (2019) for forms of gaslighting as vehicles of misogyny and psychological oppression.

in the cruelty of his comedy."[40] By sequestering Alcumena offstage, Plautus also signals a return to relative normalcy and clarity, as the *matrona* assumes her typical place within the house, her body no longer a locus of uncertainty and confusion.

[40] Phillips (1985) 122

II. PATHOLOGIZING PREGNANCY: ALCUMENA IN CONTEXT

The literal and figurative associations of Alcumena with insanity, sickness, and deviance reflect larger Greco-Roman beliefs that undermined the agency and intelligence of women. Greek and Roman medical traditions' constructions of female difference legitimized notions of women's irrationality as a biological inevitability and emphasized female nature as potentially destabilizing, not only to women themselves but also to society. The misogynistic stereotypes Sosia and Amphitruo deploy as they accuse Alcumena of witchcraft, impropriety, and insanity reflect deeper cultural biases reinforced by androcentric scientific beliefs. Pregnancy was not specifically associated with increased cognitive impairment or misconduct. It was, however, considered an extraordinarily vulnerable period for mothers and babies. Although pregnancy was absolutely necessary for maintenance of a patriarchal status quo through male heirs, it also marked a period of uncertainty and anxiety during which even the most powerful men depended on the fickle, potentially monstrous, female reproductive system. Alcumena's pregnancy, presumably emphasized by her costuming, raises the stakes of the play's conflict over her health and fidelity.

Republican Rome's conventional medical wisdom and ideologies of gender difference were influenced by Greek medical theory and by Roman patriarchal tradition. Before the third century BCE, Roman medicine was essentially folk healing, often overlapping with magic and religion and relying on the inherited wisdom of the *paterfamilias* rather than professional practitioners.[41] Aulus Gellius, quoting Varro, provides an example of how medical concerns, magic, and religion intersected in early Roman medicine, describing how Romans set up altars to

[41] Scarborough (1969) 18

goddesses of childbirth to avoid the danger of breech births.[42] This traditional Roman approach, also handed down by Pliny the Elder, collided with Hippocratic practice in the beginning of the third century BCE, when Greek doctors in the Hippocratic tradition followed the healing god Asclepius to Italy.[43] The writings of the Hippocratic *corpus* predate Plautus' career, and their influence was undoubtedly felt as Hippocratic practitioners gained a footing in Italy. Pliny and Celsus' works postdate Plautus, but can be used to extrapolate earlier Roman attitudes towards health.[44] While no medical text can be interpreted as a literal and comprehensive description of ancient medical beliefs and practices, they can be read as partial evidence of how Greeks and Romans conceptualized their bodies and their health.[45]

Different medical traditions characterize the female body using various justifications, but share a tendency to marginalize women's experiences and bodies in comparison to a standard male norm. Manuli describes ancient women's medicine as being limited to the scope of gynecology, a science "which separates itself from the physiopathology of the human body, isolating the deviance of the female from the anatomical model on which all the differences are measured: the adult male."[46] The Hippocratic woman, for example, diverges from man because of her weak and spongy skin and subsequent need to rid her body of excess moisture through

[42] Gell. *NA* XVI, 16.4

[43] Scarborough (1969) 25. Cf. Wickkiser (2003) for the introduction of Asklepian medicine to Rome.

[44] Scarborough (1969) 17

[45] Padel cautions readers of ancient medical writing against the temptation to interpret "male patterns of thinking or fantasizing about women" as literal descriptions of the historical mechanisms that "controll[ed] women in real life," since the evidence is "ambiguous, being mainly literary, and so liable to the distortion by convention and literary tradition which such evidence always creates." Padel (1983) 3.

[46] "...che si separa dalla fisiopatologia genere del corpo umano, isolando la devianza della femmina dalla modello anatomico su cui vengono misurate tutte le differenze: il maschio adulto." Manuli (1983) 151

menstruation.[47] For the Hippocratic woman's Aristotelian counterpart, the process is reversed: weakness stems from menstruation.[48] As nothing more than "ἄρρεν πεπηρωμένον," (a mutilated male) who is "defined by an inability that contrasts with a crucial male ability, by her material rather than formative role in generation," a woman is inherently inferior.[49] In both views, women's differences mark them as deficient and vulnerable.

Celsus and Pliny configure their respective human norms differently, but to a similar effect. Flemming cites the opening of Celsus' *De Medicina* as a straightforward endorsement of the Roman male elite lifestyle:

> Sanus homo, qui et bene valet et suae spontis est, nullis obligare se legibus debet, ac neque medico neque iatroalipta egere. Hunc oportet varium habere vitae genus: modo ruri esse, modo in urbe, saepiusque in agro; navigare, venari, quiescere interdum, sed frequentius se exercere; siquidem ignavia corpus hebetat, labor firmat, illa maturam senectutem, hic longam adulescentiam reddit.
>
> A healthy person, who is both strong and lives on his own terms, ought to bind himself by no laws and need neither doctor nor anointer. It is fitting that this kind of life have variety: that he be now in the countryside, now in the city, and more often, in the field; that he sail, hunt, rest sometimes, but more often exercise; accordingly, idleness weakens the body, labor strengthens it, the former brings on premature old age, the latter prolonged youth.[50]

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[47] Hippoc. *Mul.* I.1

[48] Dean-Jones (2003) 191; Flemming (2000) 116, 118-9; Aristot. *GA* 716a5-9. Flemming warns that the "diversity of the Hippocratic corpus" hinders efforts to "construct a unified view of woman," noting that Roman Republican-era gynecological work is lost, and that a comparison of Soranus and the Hippocratics "directly and in isolation, without consideration of the intervening years." We need not directly compare Soranus and the Hippocratics in order to note general commonalities and divergences likely reflected in the larger cultural context of each, and, as Flemming recommends, "to map out some of the [the tradition's] most salient features." One of Soranus' most notable departures from the Hippocratic *corpus* is his belief that, excluding reproductive maladies, women and men share the same diseases. (Sor. *Gyn* 3.1-5)

[49] Flemming (2000) 119; Arist. *GA* 737a28

[50] Cels. *Med.* I.I.I

Although Celsus nominally allows for variation according to sex and age, he avoids any thorough handling of the female body. Pliny's "more broadly conceived definition of humanity" allows him to typologize female experiences as legitimately human.[51] Nevertheless, Pliny's women are outliers and negative exempla, and where they do excel, they do so in *pietas* and *pudicitia* rather than in any male domain.[52] His technical anatomical descriptions are straightforwardly androcentric, the uterus an appendage lodged in a default male body. Performances of *Amphitruo* illustrate this view; during productions, a male actor presumably attached exaggerated padding to himself in order to assume the form of a pregnant woman, making explicit the nature of woman as deformed man and womb as excessive.

Physical departures from the male standard signified mental frailty and instability as well. For example, *Epidemics* routes female consciousness through secondary sex characteristics, explaining that excess blood pooling caused women's propensity for anger.[53] Hippocratic writers also pioneered the concept of a mobile uterus, which provided "a convenient explanation for various illnesses in a woman's body" and "deprived a woman of independent control over her own sexuality," since the womb was prone to interfere with the organs that houses the *psyche.*[54] Plato's *Timaeus* provides an even more vivid description, introducing the notion of a truly wandering womb: a "ζῶον ἐπιθυμητικὸν ἐνὸν τῆς παιδοποιίας" (an animal desiring childbearing) which, when not impregnated, "χαλεπῶς ἀγανακτοῦν φέρει," (moves painfully feeling a violent irritation), inhibiting normal bodily processes and causing "νόσους παντοδαπὰς" (sicknesses of

[51] Flemming (2000) 151

[52] Flemming (2000); Plin. *HN* 7.2.23, 29-30 discuss the reproductive abnormalities of women in foreign tribes.

[53] Hippoc. *Epid.* II.6.19. Cf. Dean-Jones (1994) 74-6 for a review of scholarship on the origins of the "wandering womb."

[54] Dean-Jones (2003) 194; Dean-Jones (1994) 69

all sorts).[55] Pliny's survey of miraculous bodies and bodily functions puts an emphasis on women's biological "peculiarities," and, as Flemming argues, suggests "that femaleness is somehow a less stable human state than maleness," particularly vulnerable to "spontaneous somatic alteration" outside of an individual woman's—and more importantly, society's—control.[56] For example, according to Pliny, women are responsible for unnatural and ominous births and can transform into males.[57] He also hyperbolizes the risks associated with pregnancy, emphasizing the "frivola" (trivial) factors—such as sneezing after sex and smelling lamps being put out—that can cause abortion.[58] Pliny even references Alcumena's pregnancy as an example of the rare, dangerous, and distinctly human phenomenon of superfetation.[59] Women's reproductive roles according to Pliny's conservative Roman perspective are, therefore, powerful but threatening, necessary but unstable, and, ultimately, controlled by forces beyond women's own consciousness. Like the Hippocratic *corpus,* these elements distance women from rational and predictable men. In his more in-depth treatment of reproductive health, Pliny beholds the menstrual cycle with wonder, cataloguing the seemingly supernatural effects of menstrual blood on the natural and built world:

> sed nihil facile reperiatur mulierum profluvio magis monstrificum. acescunt superventu musta, sterilescunt contactae fruges, moriuntur insita, exuruntur hortorum germina, fructus arborum quibus insidere decidunt, speculorum fulgor adspectu ipso hebetatur, acies ferri praestringitur, eboris nitor, alvi apium moriuntur, aes etiam ac ferrum robigo protinus corripit odorque dirus aera, in rabiem aguntur gustato eo canes atque insanabili veneno morsus inficitur.
>
> But nothing could readily be found more monstrous than the flux of women. At its arrival, fresh wine sours, grafted crops become barren, seeds wither, sprouts of the garden

[55] Dean-Jones (1994) 70; Pl. *Ti.* 91 C.

[56] Flemming (2000) 152

[57] Plin. *HN* VII. 3. 34-6

[58] Plin. *HN* VII. 6-7

[59] Plin. *HN* VII.11.48-9

> dry up, fruits of the trees on which they settle fall, the brightness of mirrors is dulled by the sight, the blades of iron and the flash of ivory are blunted, hives of bees die, rust seizes even bronze and iron at once, and a horrible smell seizes the air, dogs are driven into madness by the taste of it and their bites are infected with irremediable poison.[60]

Both Pliny's description of menstrual blood and Plato's characterization of the uterus as animated by its own motivations illustrate the overlap between gynecology and the supernatural. Indeed, women used both medical and magical forms of treatment. Though the application of magic was not limited to female patients, the female reproductive system was often considered a manifestation of supernatural forces and particularly responsive and vulnerable to magic.[61] Aubert and Faraone analyze material evidence of ritual handling of reproductive issues, including amulets and magical recipes, many of which compel a womb to cease its wandering and return to its rightful place.[62] Plato's notion of a wandering womb with a mind of its own mirrors conceptions of demonic possession, supporting Padel's argument that "women, body and mind, are regarded generally in classical literature as more open to possession and demonic infiltration" by virtue of their penetrability, both sexually and through their porous skin.[63] According to Padel, the women of fifth-century Athenian tragedy become a "social and sexual emblem of private parts suffering invasion, human and daemonic, by the outer world."[64]

Sosia and Amphitruo's appropriation of medical language in their diagnosis of Alcumena echoes a tradition wherein the *paterfamilias* maintained not only control over his family members' bodies, but also a monopoly on knowledge about those bodies. Their punchlines betray their assumption that Alcumena is acting irrationally and their expectation that

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[60] Plin. *HN* VII.15.6405

[61] Aubert (1989) 421

[62] Aubert (1989) and Faraone (2011)

[63] Padel (1983) 11

[64] Padel (1983) 16

she should defer to her husband's expertise. In the end, though, the men are proved incorrect in their accusations of insanity. This inversion of cultural expectation—that Amphitruo, as husband, *should* know better than his wife—could have both amused and challenged audience members. After Sosia claims that his mistress is not pregnant with a baby but with "insania"—challenging the very nature of her pregnancy and suggesting that her reproductive mechanisms have gone awry—he blames Alcumena's behavior on black bile, which was thought to cause *melancholia*. (718-729) This diagnosis, though not restricted to women nor specifically linked to pregnancy, could have threatened the precarious health of a pregnancy. Thus, Sosia calls into question not only whether Alcumena is pregnant with a child and potential heir, but also whether he will be healthy. Sosia's seemingly offhand admonition that Alcumena should burn incense to "prodigial" Jupiter in order to, as Christenson suggests, ward off evil forces, also has gynecological applications.[65] (739-740) One Hippocratic recommendation for luring the uterus back into its proper position was fumigation, which resembles ritual offerings to the gods as well as procedures for exorcising demons.[66]

The accusation that Alcumena is pregnant with insanity also reflects the belief that women, because of their reproductive mechanisms, were especially vulnerable to possession by external forces.[67] Indeed, Alcumena has been violated and impregnated by Jupiter. But Sosia and Amphitruo also accuse Alcumena of the inverse: being the perpetrator, rather than the victim, of magical forces. Sosia expresses mock-anxiety as he unflatteringly describes Alcumena as a follower of Bacchus whose madness threatens to subjugate her husband. (703-5) *Amphitruo* was

[65] "sed, mulier, postquam experrecta es, te prodigiali Iovi / aut mola salsa hodie aut ture comprecatam oportuit." (But woman, after you woke up today, you should have prayed to prodigial Jove either with salted meal or incense.)

[66] Hippoc. *Mul.* II.123; Manuli (1983) 157; Faraone (2011) 2, 9

[67] Christenson (200) *ad loc.*

written either shortly before or shortly after the 186 BCE Bacchanalian Conspiracy. In either case, the work was certainly contemporaneous with cultural tension tension over the cult, which stemmed specifically from its association with magic and adultery, the play's driving forces.[68]

Like followers of Bacchus, witches also threaten the patriarchal social order of their relationships and households. In her examination of the witch in Classical literature, Spaeth notes that Roman witches usually demonstrate excessive lust or other interest in the body, bewitch their lovers, and use magic to commit adultery.[69] Thus, accusations against Alcumena of being bewitched—and, conversely, of being a bewitcher—denote associations between magic, female reproduction, and adultery. Like *melancholia* and Bacchic ritual, witchcraft was not specifically associated with pregnancy, but Alcumena's pregnant state renders the diagnosis and her alleged guilt all the more threatening. Stratton, following Jonathan Walters, notes the paradox embodied by a pregnant Roman noblewoman: elite status was associated with masculinity and rested on the safety of inviolability. Pregnancy overturns both of these ideals by displaying female reproduction and revealing that a body had been penetrated. In Stratton's words, "by opening their bodies for the gestation of another—distended, morphed into two at once—noble women also posed a potential danger to the honor of a family or to the certainty of paternity."[70]

The Hippocratics actually designate pregnancy as a healthy solution to the irrationality of a mobile womb, as a fetus fills it and commits it to its biological and societal duty. The omniscient audience recognizes that Alcumena is, in fact, sane and rational in defending herself against Amphitruo. And yet, her pregnancy still signifies the central conflict of the play. Even with her mental state intact and her pregnancy healthy, her body undergoes an incredible

[68] Boatwright (2012) 130-1

[69] Spaeth (2014) 44, 53

[70] Stratton (2014) 157

experience and conceives a miraculous pregnancy, throwing her biological and social equilibrium off balance. Nothing about Alcumena's pregnancy is certain on a thematic level until the end of the play, and even then, her pregnancy and delivery are understood as fantastical expressions of superhuman forces. This unnatural pregnancy foregrounds the question of her health and her fidelity by raising questions of whether she can deliver a live, legitimate heir, or whether her pregnancy—and thus the future of her household—is somehow corrupted. When Alcumena delivers twins at the end of the play, both possibilities come true. Her pregnancy and the gender difference it betrays embody the play's uncertainty, which constitutes both its comedic and tragic elements. Questions of paternity, sanity, and health run parallel in the play, implicating Alcumena's womb as a locus for confusion, with her visible pregnancy constantly reminding the audience of her female nature, and thus, her biological propensity to experience and promote irrationality.

III. PERSISTENT PREGNANCY TROPES: ALCUMENA ON THE BIG SCREEN

Modern readers are likely to find ancient beliefs about gynecology egregious, but our own cultural attitudes towards pregnancy reflect similar prejudices rooted in modern medical belief. Like Plautus' *Amphitruo,* film and other popular media consistently characterize pregnancy as the mark of otherness, rife with dramatic potential rather than normalcy. Androcentric understandings of biology and the patriarchal power structures that encourage and rely on them influence contemporary pregnancy narratives, demonstrating that the symbiotic relationship between medical authority, the subjugation of othered bodies, and misogynistic humor did not die with Plautus. We may be able to recognize Alcumena in our own favorite characters and in ourselves.

The association of female reproductive organs and sanity survived past its Greco-Roman roots. Avicenna and Maimonides perpetuated the idea that a woman's reproductive mechanisms could interfere with her capacities—mentally, physically, and emotionally—and St. Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle's notions of gender difference.[71] Pseudoscientific bias against women persisted through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and even the Enlightenment, as models of female instability evolved into diagnoses of hysteria, original sin, and vulnerability to possession.[72] In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as women's health became increasingly medicalized and gynecologists began infringing on the traditional domain of midwives, male practitioners warned that pregnant women could displace their unborn children's fathers with their own passions and delusions, running the risk of bearing a monster instead of a

[71] Tasca *et al.* (2012) 111

[72] Cf. Tasca *et al.* (2012) for a brief but thorough history of cultural attitudes and approaches towards women's psychology, specifically hysteria, in the western medical tradition.

baby.[73] By the nineteenth century, this model evolved from a merely supernatural threat to a more credible psychiatric and physical one. The female brain threatened to drain resources from the uterus in the closed economy that was a woman's body.[74] Feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver sums up this medical outlook as a warning linking the uterus, mental health, and the stability of family and society: "women's wombs and reproductive capacities cause excessive excitations and madness that can adversely affect their fetuses and infants."[75] In 1900, the president of the American Gynecological Society compared the life cycle of a woman to a treacherous sea, upon which women are "battered and crippled on the breakers of puberty," then "dashed to pieces on the rock of childbirth," while intermittently "ground[ed] on the ever-recurring shallows of menstruation."[76] Female anatomy was, in other words, inherently pathological and abnormal. Nineteenth century feminists resisted the idea that women were inherently weak, arguing that doctors had exaggerated the perpetual infirmity of their wealthy, married, bedridden patients.[77] But this so-called "Cult of Invalidism" cannot be blamed entirely on the emerging institutions of psychiatry and gynecology, nor on the sexism or "commercial self-interest" of individual doctors; women's desires to escape from their mundane responsibilities and their fetishization of illness may have played a role.[78] Furthermore, historians have successfully traced the influence and echoes of ancient medical belief systems without attempting to trace a straight, decontextualized line from ancient practitioners directly to modern gynecologists.

[73] Oliver (2012) 112-3

[74] Ehrenreich and English (2005) Ch. 4

[75] Oliver (2012) 113

[76] Ehrenreich and English (2005) Ch. 4

[77] Ehrenreich and English (2005) Ch. 4

[78] Ehrenreich and English (2005) Ch. 4

The pathologization of women's bodies, especially their reproductive capacities, has frequently served patriarchal norms and institutions. In the modern era, the condition of working class women evidences that it was not always sincere medical belief, but elitist, sexist, and capitalist constructs that defined pregnant bodies. During the era of the "Cult of Invalidism," working class women and women of color were still expected to work—fulfilling their role in society—because they were conveniently (and circularly) considered innately stronger.[79] Between the 1808 ban of importation of slaves and the abolition of slavery in the United States, slave owners also justified forcing enslaved women to labor during pregnancy by claiming that it would make them and their offspring stronger, and thus more profitable.[80]

In the twentieth century, politicians and employers openly discriminated against pregnant women, both because of misguided medical beliefs and because public engagement by white, middle to upper class pregnant women threatened to destabilize the institution of motherhood, not to mention the efficiency of businesses loathe to grant maternity leave. In 1911, California senator and Democratic Caucus Chairman J.B. Sanford expressed opposition to women's suffrage with the common sentiment that a woman does "little good by gadding the streets and neglecting her children," and that "the kindly, gentle influence of the mother in the home and the dignified influence of the teacher in the school will far outweigh all the influence of all the mannish female politicians on earth."[81] These women faced stigma into the 1950s when they appeared in public while heavily pregnant, and women were fired for being pregnant in the

[79] Ehrenreich and English (2005) Ch. 4

[80] Molnar (2005) 177

[81] Sanford (1911)

1960s.[82] The workplace was no place for a woman to make others uncomfortable by visibly manifesting her sexual history.[83]

Even after women's suffrage and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 removed many institutional barriers to civic and employment access, tropes of the crazy, unstable, and destabilizing pregnant woman persist in public discourse and popular media.[84] In her book *Pregnancy in Literature and Film,* English professor and gender scholar Parley Ann Boswell explores the allure of pregnancy narratives and the implications of staging pregnant bodies. Boswell explains that upon seeing a pregnant woman in film or in person, viewers "most likely assume one thing about her: we all think that we know how she became pregnant—at least technically."[85] Pregnancy proclaims a woman's sexual history, at least in part, while paradoxically desexualizing her. Boswell examines the 1968 comedy *Funny Girl,* in which a pregnant bride played by Barbra Streisand sings, "I am the beautiful reflection / of my love's affection."[86] Phillips also cites *Funny Girl* as comparanda for the body humor of Alcumena's monologue. [87] (633-53) Like Alcumena's audience, viewers of *Funny Girl* can delight in the irony that an evidently sexually active woman can express her sexuality apparently ignorant of the fact that her pregnant body is un-sexy. Both of their bodies become punch lines, however serious their words. This kind of sight gag supports Boswell's theory that pregnancy eventually

[82] Molnar (2005) 171

[83] Molnar (2005) 171

[84] Molnar (2005) 163

[85] Boswell (2004) 11

[86] *Funny Girl* (1968); Boswell (2004) 22

[87] Phillips (1985) n.10

"eclipse[s]" the pregnant person, the changes to her body becoming a "visual fetish," "another tale in the public discourse, just another predictable, sometimes laughable caricature."[88]

American film has drawn inspiration from the association of pregnancy with the supernatural as well. Even as medical technology allows us to understand pregnancy scientifically, to literally glimpse the inner workings of a pregnant womb, anxiety over pregnancy persists. The same year that *Funny Girl* hit theaters, *Rosemary's Baby* ushered in the horror motif of monstrous pregnancy.[89] Rosemary eventually accepts her demonic child despite the fact that she has been under the impression that her husband, rather than Satan, was the father, and is not initially complicit in her own possession. Season two of *Game of Thrones* also includes the birth of a demon, depicting a truly monstrous pregnancy and birth process that has been condensed, by black magic, into a few seconds.[90] The mother in question, Melisandre, is a witch and practitioner of "blood magic," whose intentional conception and birthing of a demon is perhaps not as jarring as the body horror of her abdomen suddenly swelling and pulsing before the delivery. Rosemary and Melisandre, respectively, illustrate the stereotype of pregnant woman as bewitch-able and bewitcher. The body horror they conjure is also evoked in the zombie movie *Dawn of the Dead* and the television drama *The Walking Dead.*[91] As society crumbles in apocalyptic collapse, so too do any predictable expectations of pregnancy, which, in a functioning society and in a healthy womb, should result not in possession or invasion but with a baby and the consequent perpetuation of the family unit. Gynecologists have, thankfully, moved past concerns over demons and witches. Pregnancy narratives in popular media, however,

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[88] Boswell (2001) 13

[89] Boswell (2001) 126; *Rosemary's Baby* (1968)

[90] *Game of Thrones,* "Garden of Bones" (2012)

[91] *Dawn of the Dead* (2004); *The Walking Dead,* "Killer Within" (2012)

achieve horror and drama by capitalizing on pregnancy-related anxieties, emphasizing society's reliance on reproductive health, and enhancing a sense of mystery that prevails even as pregnancy is increasingly understood. *Amphitruo's* most dramatic and intense moments—as Sosia and Amphitruo accuse Alcumena of being cursed, crazy, and crazy-making—reveal similar attitudes, operating within a cultural context where the unpredictability of female biology could be subversive and threatening.

Amphitruo is, however, a comedy as well as a tragedy, and the confusion stemming from Alcumena's pregnancy contributes heartily to the play's humor. In modern film, too, pregnancy is not limited to the realm of drama, science fiction, and horror. Oliver traces the emergence of a comedy genre she calls the *momcom,* which inserts pregnancy narratives into romantic comedy. Like *Amphitruo,* these momcoms make light of the themes of deception and mistaken identity and measure normalcy against a nuclear, heterosexual family. And like *Amphitruo,* these films capitalize on stereotypes of pregnant women as humorously emotional or delirious and physically abnormal. *Knocked Up,* a 2007 box office and critical hit, tells the story of an uptight career woman named Alison who conceives after a one night stand with immature stoner Ben. The pregnancy softens Alison and civilizes Ben, the couple's unlikely romance and impending parenthood remedying their alleged personality flaws. Oliver critiques a scene in which Ben tells a "raging Alison that her hormones are talking and not her, suggesting that she is possessed by an alien force that is making her do things against her will."[92] It is through her loss of emotional and physical control that Alison is domesticated and overcomes her control-freak ways to achieve domestic normalcy and personal stability.

[92] Oliver (2012) 72

In 2010 motion pictures *The Back-up Plan* and *The Switch,* the female protagonists have the audacity to try to control their reproductive destinies. *The Back-up Plan's* Zoe, played by Jennifer Lopez, anticipates the closing of her fertility window and decides to conceive as a single mother through artificial insemination. The day after her procedure, she meets and falls in love with Stan, who endures her pregnancy emotions and failures in communication. Several scenes employ Zoe's pregnant body for comic relief. As her hormones heighten her sex drive, she loses control and climaxes on a shaky public bus. At the close of the film, the couple parents IVF-conceived twins, but the real happy ending comes as Zoe discovers she is pregnant again, this time by Stan. The message of this film, argues Oliver, is that Zoe should have waited to find love before turning to technology to give her an nontraditional motherhood experience, and that the couple's shared biological child is more legitimate than the twins, whose uncertain parentage creates anxiety for their adoptive father.[93] By making an affirmative decision to get pregnant, she ends up throwing her life into chaos. *The Back-up Plan* and *Knocked Up* share their framing of the pregnant body as comical. Oliver explains:

> Of course, the size of the pregnant body as it moves through space—or gets stuck in it—is a source of comedy in most of these films. The pregnant body is the quintessential leaky body out of control, whose liquid and gaseous emissions—not to mention the "emission" of another body—conjure the uncanny predicament of human embodiment, not quite animal but not master of itself either.[94]

Like *The Back-up Plan, The Switch* opens with the predicament of an aging and baby-crazy single woman. Kassie, played by Jennifer Aniston, decides to conceive by a sperm donor, but her best friend Wally drunkenly replaces her chosen sperm with his own. Kassie, none the wiser, moves away to bear and raise her child until she reconnects years later with Wally, whom she

[93] Oliver (2012) 71

[94] Oliver (2012) 79

then falls for. Although *The Switch* does not depict the pregnancy itself, it projects messages similar to those in *The Back-up Plan,* portraying artificial insemination as an unfavorable alternative to *real* conception and parenting, which should ideally center a nuclear family.[95] Few reviewers noted the toxic dynamic between Wally and Kassie, but *Variety's* Andrew Barker points out that "the switch" is "a twisted, almost rape-like violation" played off "as a charmingly bumbling folly."[96] Ironically, the short story that inspired *The Switch,* Jeffrey Eugenides' "The Baster," actually implies that Wally's deception is a manipulative, selfish deception that robs Tomasina (the Kassie figure) of her bodily autonomy.[97] Like Alcumena, Kassie is violated on one of the most intimate levels and she resolves her unusual reproductive experience by tethering it to traditional family structure.

Some pregnant women in film resist reductivist stereotypes to represent themselves. While no one film represents the wide range of pregnancy experiences—and my examples illustrate the consistent privileging of white, conventionally attractive women's narratives—I point to *Juno* and *Parks and Recreation* for examples of pregnant characters assuming agency even when their pregnancies are unpredictable and unplanned. *Juno*, a 2007 independent teen movie, follows 16-year-old Juno MacGuff as she navigates an unplanned pregnancy.[98] Weighing the options of abortion versus adoption, cultivating a relationship with her baby's father, and grappling with general highschool angst, Juno approaches her pregnancy with a dry sense of irony that does not preclude genuine emotional self-discovery. Juno consciously decides to continue her pregnancy and successfully handles the pitfalls of selecting an adoptive family,

[95] Oliver (2012) 71

[96] Barker (2010)

[97] Eugenides (1996)

[98] *Juno* (2007)

eventually handing her parental rights over to a single woman eager for the experience of parenthood. She also sardonically creates her own pregnancy jokes with a self-deprecating humor that reveals self awareness of the way society views her, calling herself a "cautionary whale." In *Parks and Recreation,* the protagonist Leslie Knope often encounters and tackles sexist stereotypes about female biology. In the second season's twentieth episode, "Summer Catalog," Leslie hilariously tells off an older male superior who has told her that her menstrual cycle could attract bears.[99] In the season's "Hunting Trip" episode, Leslie uses a park ranger's prejudice against him, covering up a blunder by her team by blaming it on the fact that she is an emotional, "stupid" woman.[100] The butt of the joke is not, surprisingly, the woman proclaiming herself stupid, but the ranger who accepts her statement at face value despite the fact that she is a highly competent and intelligent overachiever. She manipulates him to her own advantage. In season six, when Leslie conceives triplets and is warned that stress could endanger her high risk pregnancy, she subverts expectations by calming down her anxious—dare I say hysterical—husband.[101] She acknowledges the medical and financial risk of her pregnancy, and, in the same episode, accepts a huge promotion on a trajectory towards the national political stage. These two examples suggest that the trials of pregnancy can be portrayed on screen with humor and honesty when creators invert misogynistic tropes used by Plautus and modern movie producers alike. Pregnancy, even when it carries with it a measure of unpredictability and wonder, can be normalized.

Hollywood comedies contend with notion that pregnant women are more emotional, less in control, and less competent than their male and nonpregnant female counterparts by adopting

[99] *Parks and Recreation,* "Summer Catalog" (2009)

[100] *Parks and Recreation,* "Hunting Trip" (2009)

[101] *Parks and Recreation,* "Flu Season 2" (2014)

or disrupting this expectation. Actual pregnant women grapple with these expectations as well. A Google search for "mommy brain" retrieves a catalogues of pregnant women's mental lapses. Scarymommy.com lists "30 Signs You Have Mom Brain." An eCard meme depicting a woman holding two babies states, "I used to have functioning brain cells, but I traded them in for children." Parents Magazine assures, "Foggy-headedness goes hand in hand with motherhood." Mommy brain is typically played for laughs. Buzzfeed calls "Mom Brain" a "Hilariously Rude Thing," citing anecdotal evidence of women forgetting to place the coffee pot under the maker, burning toast, and wearing mismatched shoes.

Is there truth or scientific basis behind these mommy brain claims? Writing for *The New York Times,* Dr. Alexandra Sacks explains that "current evidence in scientific literature suggests that pregnancy changes the brain on a physical, cellular level in ways that we are only beginning to understand," but the changes are hardly destabilizing or debilitating.[102] While pregnant women and new mothers may experience short-term lapses in remembering words, their reasoning capacities are not impaired. Changes in gray matter may actually improve empathy and caretaking instincts. Additionally, fathers, adoptive parents, and queer parents who do not give birth experience their own psychological and physiological changes, "but 'daddy brain' is rarely discussed in a cultural or scientific context in association with cognitive decline."[103] Sacks points out that in scientific studies, pregnant women overestimate their own brain fog, and that personal changes and challenges during early parenthood are also linked to a complex matrix of new responsibility, sleep deprivation, and social expectation, not just female biology. She calls for a reframing of mommy brain, a new outlook that considers emotional development and mental adaptation as an advantage rather than a failure.

[102] Sacks (2018)

[103] Sacks (2018)

It would be counterintuitive to undermine women's claims to their own lived, bodily experience by insisting that despite pregnancy, their minds are capable of achieving success as measured by traditionally male metrics. By uncritically banishing the notion of mommy brain in the name of gender equality, we risk wielding authority over women in the same way that patriarchal institutions have used authority to reinforce it. In normalizing and demystified pregnancy, we need not deny that pregnancy can indeed thrust a woman and her partner into chaos, especially in a society where pregnant people face systemic economic, social, and physical hardship. While some headlines about mommy brain are disheartening in their portrayal of women as incompetent, many of them are by women themselves. For the first time, pregnant people can communicate their intimate experiences of pregnancy publicly using the Internet. They can assume authority over their own bodies, enjoy solidarity, and voice their needs and struggles within social and economic frameworks that were not designed to accommodate them. Furthermore, through humor, they can enjoy their pregnancies—or at least cope with them—through their own laughter, a strategy withheld from Alcumena and her husband.

CONCLUSION

Plautus' *Amphitruo* is driven by confusion. The mistaken identities, quick exchanges, and dramatic irony that illustrate this confusion undoubtedly provoked laughter from audiences who were accustomed to see these tropes played out in comedies. The confusion also has grave repercussions, though, the tension between Amphitruo and Alcumena threatening to undermine their household and their status as a respectable couple. The balance between comedic and tragic elements of *Amphitruo*'s chaos qualifies the play as a tragicomedy, and invites us to consider the paradox that the pregnant Alcumena embodies. Her body and its otherness provide rich material for Amphitruo and Sosia's misogynistic jokes and for sight gags, but the threat of infidelity, divorce, and corruption conveys seriousness. The gravity of Alcumena and Amphitruo's situation would have been heightened, both by fear of pregnancy's risks as they were understood in context, and by male anxiety over female reproductive power.

In modern American society, which has begun to grant pregnant women labor protections and reproductive agency only within the last generation (and has yet to extend these same rights to pregnant individuals other than cisgender women), pregnant bodies are exploited for similar purposes. In horror, drama, and comedy, pregnancies are often depicted as deviations from a norm, and pregnant women are beheld with amazement, disgust, and condescension. Recent scientific research on pregnancy's effects on the brain, coupled with expanded capacities for pregnant women to write their own pregnancy narratives, has the potential to reframe pregnancy as natural, but not mandatory, and to recognize pregnant women as competent, but not content with, being measured against androcentric norms and expectations.

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